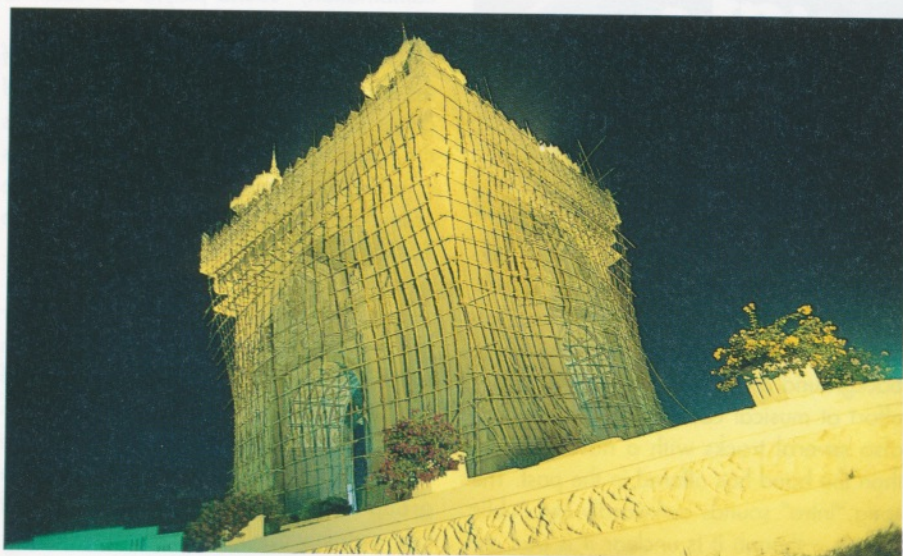


Saving the Regime

Three recent books on Laos help illuminate big changes in a small, quiet country



AREA HANDBOOKS from the Federal Research Division of the US Library of Congress used to be a series of heavy, dark-green bound volumes dense with text and facts—which were always heavily biased in favor of the US government and often became obsolete after only a few years on the shelves. This reviewer has bought many volumes from the series for only a few dollars in second-hand book shops, where they ended up when libraries were cleaned out of old material.

The new look of the Area Handbook series is therefore most welcome: a bright white cover, drawings, photographs, charts, and maps. The text has also become more readable. Rather than lecturing the reader about the merits of US foreign policy and the devious designs of all its opponents, this new volume about Laos (*Laos: A Country Study*, edited by Andrea Matles Savada, Library of Congress) discusses issues, presents different points of view and is, by and large, an extremely informative reference book about a little-known country. Hopefully, these new-style volumes will not end up in the book boxes at the annual Ploenchit

Fair in Bangkok, but get the attention which they actually deserve.

With so few books about Laos being published these days (other than coffee table books), the new Area Handbook is needed, especially when the country is opening up to foreign investment and tourism. The book covers Laos's history from the early years of civilization to the situation today, while also examining government and politics, society, the environment, and the economy.

But the Area Handbook also has serious limitations inherent in the very nature of the volume: It is supposed to cover all aspects of Laos in about three hundred pages. Thus, Australian anthropologist Grant Evans's detailed and scholarly study of Lao peasant society, *Lao Peasants Under Socialism and Post-Socialism* (Silkworm Books), is a necessary complement for anyone who wants to fully understand today's problems and challenges—and especially why socialism failed in Laos. Mr Evans, who is based in Hong Kong, also goes far beyond the "kings and wars" approach to history of the Area Handbook by looking into society's undercurrents—forces which actually shape history.

The strongest chapter in Mr Evans's book is an analysis of Lao peasant economy and society versus collective economy. He challenges traditional views, vigorously promoted by Marxist rulers who wanted to collectivize agricultural economies by claiming that there is a cooperative nature in rural societies, an argument which would lead to the notion that socialist policies are in harmony with traditional peasant practice.

Mr Evans argues convincingly that all peasant economies have their own irreducible logic and rationality whereas state-imposed collectivization actually upsets established patterns of kinship, loyalties, and traditional cooperative bonds. Almost universal opposition among rural communities to superimposed collectivization campaigns throughout history proves this point: be it in the Soviet Union of the 1920s, China of the early 1950s, or Vietnam of the late 1950s.

In fact, he says, this was the reason why Laos's communists had to abandon socialism to become crusaders for capitalism. They had to save the regime and preserve its perhaps most important accomplishment since it came to power in 1975: the national unity which it managed to create among an ethnically and socially diverse population for the first time in centuries.

The late Kaysone Phomvihane, the founder of the present regime in Laos and a revolutionary veteran, actually took the initiative in the late 1980s to modernize the Lao economy: Rural cooperatives were disbanded, small-scale state enterprises were sold to private entrepreneurs, and foreign investment was encouraged. It is, as Mr Evans points out, the regimes in countries such as Laos—and China and Vietnam—which have survived, not socialism.

In the case of Laos, the irony may be that one lasting achievement of communist rule apart from forging national unity has been the creation of a new elite committed to capitalist modernization. Laos's experiment with socialism from 1975 until the late 1980s effectively broke the stifling power of old feudal structures and paved the way for a new, more modern society, albeit one with some remaining socialist characteristics such as a single-party political system.

Consequently, Laos today says it practices "market socialism," essentially private enterprise controlled by state directives. This may sound like another para-

dox, but in a Lao context it seems to work, and if the alternative is to be completely free-wheeling capitalism, the government apparently feels that Laos would be danger of losing its independence to the much more powerful economic interests of its much richer and more populous neighbours.

Kaysone the erstwhile communist revolutionary is still being worshipped as a national hero in Laos, but now as Kaysone the patriot, nation builder, and architect of radical reform policies. Socialism has come and gone in Laos. In order to understand why and how this happened, Mr Evans's book is indispensable.

Martin Stuart-Fox's most recent book, *Buddhist Kingdom, Marxist State: The Making of Modern Laos* (White Lotus), is also a valuable contribution to the study of the country. Mr Stuart-Fox's approach to the problems of modern Laos differs considerably from Mr Evans's, however. He describes how the once "Buddhist Kingdom" has been transformed into a Marxist state—and how, somewhat ironically, the ruling communist party has turned the Buddhist *sangha* into a pliant instrument of the new regime. The book is detailed and informative, but it lacks the kind of deeper analysis of Lao society which Mr Evans provides. On the other hand, Mr Stuart-Fox presents a regional perspective which is missing in Mr Evans's book: how Laos, having lost its East European mentors, is rapidly being integrated with the expanding economies of Southeast Asia.

But, as Mr Stuart-Fox points out, "increased national wealth can translate into higher living standards and higher levels of social spending for the entire population—providing too much does not fall into the hands of a selfish and greedy elite, whose personal wealth comes from selling off the nation's resources to the highest briber." That elite, Mr Stuart-Fox argues, consists to a large extent of children and other relatives of the founders of the Marxist state who now have acquired a taste for a life quite different from that of their revolutionary parents.

Together, these three new books on Laos give the reader basically everything he needs to know about the country today. That each book presents a different perspective and approach is in that context only an asset.

—Bertil Lintner

ON THE MOVE

IT WAS 1972 and the Peoples Republic of China was in the throes of its "Decade of Chaos", known in the West as the Cultural Revolution. Most of Southeast Asia was embroiled in war, insurgency or political instability, much of which was backed, or perceived to be backed, by the PRC. In this same year noted China scholar C P FitzGerald published his last major work, *The Southern Expansion of the Chinese People*, and no doubt in some circles the title seemed a bit apocalyptic.

Although events since then have made past fears seem almost laughable, there is evidence that the Chinese peoples' slow but relentless southward expansion, at least as old as recorded history itself, is an ongoing thing. In fact, it would be fair to say that if not for the centuries-long southward expansion of Chinese into present day Yunnan Province, the subsequent migration of Tai peoples into what is now Thailand might never have occurred. With such thought-provoking tidbits, FitzGerald's book is still a very readable tale of the ebb and flow of empires and people on the move.

The book (reprinted by White Lotus in 1993) shows how Chinese conquests of Yunnan and Vietnam spread Chinese culture into areas formerly under the influence of Indianized cultures at the same time that sea-borne Chinese traders bearing tea, silk and porcelain carried their wares deep into the East Indian archipelago, setting up trading communities that were the forerunners of today's economically dynamic Chinese communities in the region.

The British were quick to see Chinese immigrants as a boon to the economy, so much so that Sir Stamford Raffles was convinced that they would ensure the success of his newly established colony

The **SOUTHERN EXPANSION** *of the* **CHINESE PEOPLE**

C. P. FitzGerald



of Singapore. The Spanish, on the other hand, saw the Chinese community that ringed the walls of old Manila as a menace and, despite dependence on it for the majority of basic goods, found it necessary to incite the Filipinos to massacre the entire community in 1603 and 1639. A 1776 order expelling all Chinese was later revoked when the economy fell into ruin.

In Thailand an early tolerance that greeted the first groups of Chinese settlers early in the 19th century turned to suspicion and fear when a growing flood of Chinese newcomers slowed the rate of assimilation. By the start of the 20th century the status-conscious Thai nobility saw the moneyed class of ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs as a threat.

In retrospect, the Thai government's policy of suppressing Chinese schools, while seemingly harsh by today's standards, surely went a long way in speeding up assimilation. FitzGerald also points out that ethnic similarities between Thais and Chinese may have helped avoid much of the discrimination and sometimes violent repercussions faced by Chinese in Malaysia and Indonesia.

FitzGerald's death in 1992 has left the book without an updated afterword. The last chapter, about the possible future southern expansion of China, makes for an interesting contrast with the current situation in the region, however. The vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the scaling down of the US military presence in Southeast Asia could still be filled by China. Just how the countries which lie to the south deal with such issues as the disputed ownership of the Spratly Islands may determine whether or not the great Chinese dragon will continue its centuries old move southward.

—Steven Martin